

# Uncertain locations: between text and image

## Introduction

I begin from an uncertain time for me. I am at an intersection; a place where possibility is disguised by choice. However, I am also aware that to be paused at an intersection is also to be lost in some way, to be momentarily without direction or purpose. It may also be a chance to simultaneously retain two seemingly contradictory or oppositional ideas and to place oneself between both of them. In doing so it is as though my location is continuously 'uncertain.' I wish then to track this movement and to re-orientate my thoughts toward uncertainty and embrace its possibilities.

## Giving voice to photography

This paper attempts to give a voice to photography. Which is something I have been doing for most of my adult life. Attempting to give some attention to what it is to photograph:

What happens and what does it mean when I photograph? I photograph therefore I am. I photograph where I am not: I am not where I photograph. And what takes place when I look at images of others? You are there in my photographs of you - but you are not here, where I want you to be. Beside me. You are there, at a distance from me. Between here and there.

To understand what it is that photography asks when it speaks with the 'infinite and perpetual present tense' I draw on Rancière's ontology of the image where he suggested images have both a visual and textual form. He stated that there are images that are simple likenesses and also images that consist of words. "Visibility does not amount to an image" (p7, 2009b). For Rancière, it is the relationship between what is said and what can be seen

that is both analogous but also a 'dissemblance;' a false appearance. Like Rancière I shall define the image as being a connection of the verbal and the visual, as a link between the seen and spoken.

## **Our community voice**

In giving a voice to photography I also hope to be able to attend to our voices, the voices of the communities in which we find ourselves. By community I mean not just the physical, proximity based grouping of people located in and around a particular area. Community in my context emerges from the connections and encounters we make, it is the shared experiences and common ground we stand upon. A community I argue not only located within a landscape but also it *has* a landscape, a terrain described by a collective discourse or narrative. It is this narrative and the ways in which it forms different types of community that I will return to in a moment.

## **Imaginary relations to the real / vital materiality**

But firstly I wish to speak about the echo, which can be heard emanating from the landscape around us. Artist and theorist Victor Burgin, when speaking about photographs taken in war zones 'after the event,' suggests: "the ubiquity of broadcast and print journalism - guarantees that any space will resound with the world's conflicts *in the mind of the viewer*, whether or not it bears a visible inscription of conflict . . . symbolic and real violence perpetually invest our imaginary relation to all the perceived world." (Parallel Texts, p173). What Burgin is suggesting is that even when we encounter the most picturesque landscape there is no escaping the brutal reality of global conflicts that are a part of it and a part of us. It is as though we bring our imaginary landscapes to every location. Imagining worlds onto them as they project their *se/ves* onto us. Similarly, our sense of community may be inscribed onto the physical landscape by buildings and landmarks as well as through notions of heritage and nostalgia. Additionally, community can take the form of individual, intimate and personal narratives that are woven together to create

a collective identity. It is embodied in the physical and the affective. I believe the relationship between the imaginary and the perceived world can be thought of in terms of what Jane Bennett has described as a “contingent tableau” – or a vital materiality ‘between things’ and between our encounters with those things.

Bennett’s ‘New Materialist’ arguments offer different theoretical tools to conceptualize the world by suggesting that we need to consider ‘things,’ stuff, matter, objects as having agency, which transmit and receive affect.

“Affect holds a key to rethinking postmodern power after ideology. For although ideology is still very much with us, often in the most virulent of forms, it is no longer encompassing. It no longer defines the global mode of functioning of power. It is now one mode of power in a larger field that is not defined, overall, by ideology.” (Parables for the Virtual p42 Brian Massumi [moosoomi])

*“There seems to be a growing feeling within media, literary and art theory that affect is central to an understanding of our information- and image-based late capitalist culture, in which so-called master narratives are perceived to have foundered.” (ibid, page 26)*

## **Materiality through the narratives of communities**

It is with the ‘agency of objects’ in mind that I will argue how we can close a perceived divide between speaking subjects and mute objects. Beginning with materiality – materials – with the stuff things are made of, I want to consider materiality through the collective narrative of communities, of groups with shared interests and concerns – a narrative I have listened to through the participatory photography projects I have been involved in. These projects came from my observations while teaching in the community. Observations that suggested that ‘learning photography’ can also become an activity, which I like to describe as ‘thinking with photography.’ Digital imaging and

photography have become as Martin Hand puts it: “thoroughly ordinary accompaniments to communication and connection practices in daily life” (Hand, p11). Hand argues that photography has morphed and become woven into the fabric of economic, social, political and cultural forms.

There is a “standardized visual landscape” (Hand p12, 2012) or a formula of imagery that we all currently experience. It is generally produced by what Paul Frosh describes as “ordinary images” (Frosh, p2, 2003). A type of imagery that appears natural or unremarkable but is in fact part of “our everyday visual environment” (ibid); these images are the signifiers that constitute us as subjects. They are the advertising, publicity and stock imagery that we all but ignore.

There is also another form of imagery that at times emulates or strives to imitate Frosh’s ordinary image. These are the images produced by many of us, which are part of the personal *photographies* Hand writes about. These images aspire to a particular look; they have a recognizable visual grammar. But they are not domestic, personal, private or family snap shots. They are images we chose to take, share or look at as part of personal expression. They are photographs of how we see and how we want to be seen.

The work I have done with communities using participatory photography has demonstrated that taking photographs *modifies* how we see ourselves and how we view where we live. It is apparent that given a camera our worlds begin to be perceived photographically. As though images are somehow ‘found’ or await our discovery. And after they appear to us in the world, digital images go on to become something of a prosthetic memory within shared networked spaces. Attached to ‘tags,’ ‘comments’ and ‘likes.’ Photographs are no longer and perhaps never were just visual.

## **The relationships entangled within images**

I began then with considering materiality and I have two questions I wish to consider. What are photographs made of? And what are communities made of? I want to explore some of these ideas and ask what we can do with this understanding. How can ideas connected to these questions be *usefully used* and what purpose could they have? I begin from Victor Burgin's book "Thinking Photography" which challenged the concept of the autonomous, creative artist, the idea of photographic truth, and the notion of the purely visual. Instead this book offered an account of the production of meaning within social institutions, within society and within the unconscious. In the 30 or so years after the publication of Burgin's work contemporary photographic theory has struggled to find any significant purchase. As our culture becomes more rapidly visual it seems the theories that Burgin was moving 'toward' are more relevant today than ever – giving us a toolkit to understand the complex processes which support photographic meaning. Thinking *with* photography forces me to consider the relational possibilities of the things entangled in images like texts and memories.

This means that we are not only concerned with the visual but also the narratives expressed in and by what we see. It is the history of lives and where we live that contribute to the communities we create and experience. Our understanding of society over the last hundred years has been largely photographic and when social realities become visible they take on a form of accountability. Photographs afford us sociability, sharing and cultural fixing and in parallel communities offer us similar things.

But who are we if we are not seen, if we are not in some way represented? This is not to privilege photography over writing: "Writing is embedded in all democratic rights attained by people" (Cruz, A.L. "Words leaking from objects: thinking with absent photographs" in Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology, Volume 3, Number 1, Fall 2012).

However, words can indicate class and intellectuality, they are not neutral. Of course the neutrality of photography is also constructed and sometimes mistakenly assumed and never more so than in a world of repeated visual

themes – the selfie, the sunset, the social document. But much of the history and theory of photography has previously been focused on the analysis of specific imagery – concerned with the discursive nature of the photograph rather than how they are used. These days there is little doubt that in the evolution from analogue to digital *how* the photograph is used in society has also changed. Digital imagery is at the very least far easier and quicker to shoot, to manipulate and of course to share. Even though what we share is thematically similar to what everyone else is sharing.

Lacan suggested that we think of: “. . . language as a network, a net over the entirety of things, over the totality of the real. It inscribes on the plane of the real this other plane, which we call here the plane of the symbolic.” (Bond, p32). If language and words function as a network then so too do our images, the things we turn into photographs and to which we become *subject* to.

## **Materiality**

What happens if matter, if things, ‘photographic things’ are reconsidered as non-representational. What if we re-orientate our relationships with and to photographs? What if we consider the materiality of the photograph and the agency it may have. What if we ask: “What is the matter?”

On the one hand a photograph is a single surface, an image formed through the process of light falling onto a light sensitive surface. On the other hand a photograph is caught within the lives of humans. Photographs are given significance by these lives, they are spoken about and embedded into the narratives of memory. Photographs can best be understood if we turn to interpretation not just of the image but also of the lives themselves.

Democracy is anthropocentric. It puts humans first, at the centre of all things. It assumes active subjects and passive objects. But what if images are not passive – as they force us to consider who we are, they produce and consume us. The ‘materiality’ of the image is the complex significance that it

takes from its inclusion in our lives. As matter we are as important to the photograph as it is to us. Photographic-ness is not in the photographs 'nature,' not in its form. Photographic-ness is something that emerges from the photograph's participation in its contexts, in the ways photographs are embedded in us as individuals and in us as communities and of course the ways they affect us and other things. Many of our previous ideas about photography have been based on attempts to give it a quantifiable nature. An approach that implies dominion through ordering, and one that gives us permission to imagine a sense of mastery over the material world. However it may be better to understand ourselves as embedded within it.

The real world issues raised in the photographic projects I have run include the visual impact of solar farms, the clutter of signage, the implications of privacy, the excuse for social encounters, a questioning as to what is art, consideration of the notions of beauty, of authenticity, of what is real or faked and of course a host of personal, self reflective questions around memory and identity. These questions emerged by giving attention to where and who we are and allowing voices to articulate the narratives and concerns that are a part of communities.

For the participants in my research there has consistently been a sense in which the world is seen 'photographically' and this is often associated with noticing details or seeing a different point of view. All of these are good terms for *communities* and for *human relationships*. All these help us speak out and up for one another. In our own hands, our image, in our own voice, our story.

## **Final Slide**

To place image and word together is to create a context for a third space – a space between these two - an uncertain location, that is not accounted for by any singular theory or universal emotion. Rather it is the space of our unconscious interaction that has an individual resonance within a community

or social context. In this space we are able to press against the world with our own weight, leaving our own marks on its surface.

To appropriate and miss-quote Calvino in his book *Invisible Cities*: “Everyday we describe a photograph, we say something about ourselves.”



What cannot be said needs to be seen.

Lomax, Yve. *Writing the Image. An Adventure with Art and Theory*. London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000, p. 79 & 216: "A photographic body is not a fixed unit with a static structure. A photographic body, like the weather, is always on the move, even if it appears perfectly still. A photographic body is continually entering into relations, composing relations and decomposing relations."

Bergson's concept of *duree* is the par excellence condition of "the continuous life of a memory which prolongs the past into the present." (Cariou, Marie. 'Bergson. The Keyboards of Forgetting. ' *The New Bergson*, Ed. John Mullarkey. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999.99-1 17.) in 490242.pdf p14.

Where we are and who we are is a product of what we say, what we write and what we see. What we see is conditioned by how we represent and are represented.

"The panorama was the privileged instrument of modernist urban vision" (Vidler, Anthony, 2000 *The Panoramic Unconscious: Victor Burgin and Spatial Modernism* in *Shadowed London*: AA Publications)

With reference to a 'collaborative turn' Palmer writes, "Thinking about photography in collaborative terms invites us to reconfigure assumptions about the photographic act in all its stages," (Palmer, 2013). Palmer suggests that images are produced through engagement and are collectively produced and experienced. It is with this in mind and in an attempt to understand such a reconfiguration that my research explores the relationship between people, photography and the landscape through community based photography workshops. The collectively produced and experienced image that Palmer refers to is similarly described by Hand as a 'weaving of photographs. . . into

every corner of contemporary society' (p1, 2012). He suggests that what he describes as ubiquitous photography requires new approaches to understand it. These approaches need to address the changes in technology, current debates about realism and representation and broader concerns around social and cultural change. One of the focuses of this research project is to consider photography not as singular activity of one individual but to pay attention to it as part of a pervasive discourse, that Hand describes as being part of a large number of cultural forms, institutions and apparatus. In considering this discourse, this language of the photographic, we will examine some of its themes, the repetitions and recycling of ideas that are apparent within in it and ask what if anything, these signify and why they occur.

In a world of distributed agency assigning singular blame is difficult. Therefore we may ask whether accountability is undermined by a New Materialist approach. However singular accountability is often responsible for hatred (Bin Laden) and is unethical in its legitimization of vengeance.